




Multiple antisocial personalities?

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Engelmann et al. ask whether “personality traits [can] help us better understand economic behavior across strategic contexts” (ref. 1, p. 12781), and, as an answer to this, identify “an antisocial personality profile” (APP) (ref. 1, p. 12785). There is much to like about this investigation; in particular, it illustrates “that variations in personality can be as important as variations in ‘the situation’ and that important interactions between personality characteristics and situational features exist” (ref. 1, p. 12786). Notwithstanding this, we argue that the lack of integrating previous evidence concerning the research questions together with the cumbersome derived, theoretically nonintegrated APP hampers rather than facilitates a better understanding of an antisocial personality, and how it can interact with situational features. Specifically, to derive the APP, Engelmann et al. conducted an exploratory factor analysis of “self-report measures from personality psychology” (ref. 1, p. 12785), including measures of, for example, agreeableness and Machiavellianism. Importantly, these (and other) personality traits have been linked to antisocial behavior repeatedly, including the main outcome of Engelmann et al.: trust game behavior (for a review even focusing on person–situation interactions, see ref. 2; for a recent meta-analysis, see ref. 3). Given that Engelmann et al. (1) neither theoretically distinguish the APP from its parts (e.g., Machiavellianism) nor empirically test the effectiveness of the APP against its parts, the value of deriving the APP (as compared to looking at any of the included constructs) is unclear. Moreover, the paper neglects that there are theoretically well-defined, established personality traits clearly tapping into antisocial personality, such as agreeableness/antagonism (4), honesty–humility (5), the dark triad

of personality (6), or the core of antisocial “dark” personality traits in general (7). These established traits have not only been linked to trust game behavior but also to the other main findings put forward by Engelmann et al.: interactions between person and situation factors (including in economic games) and “that antisocial individuals have beliefs and behaviors based on a view of the world that assumes that most others are as antisocial as they themselves are” (ref. 1, p. 12781 and see ref. 8). Neglecting the theorizing and evidence around these traits is a theoretical shortcoming (because it hampers a good understanding of what an antisocial personality is), an empirical shortcoming (because it hampers an informed decision about whether the APP adds any value), and a practical shortcoming (because the APP was derived from ~192 items, whereas the mentioned traits can be assessed via fewer than 20 items). Indeed, in a (preregistered) study with 456 participants, we find that the APP correlates substantially with honesty–humility ($r = -0.72$) and the dark factor of personality ($r = 0.71$), respectively (see ref. 9 and Fig. 1), indicating a strong overlap between the APP and these theoretically well-defined, established constructs; this study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Copenhagen and informed consent was obtained. In summary, the lack of considering established knowledge does not facilitate, but blurs, a better understanding of “the psychology and economics of antisocial personality” (ref. 1, p. 12781), and we suggest interested readers rather turn to the existing evidence concerning theoretically and empirically better-described personality traits.

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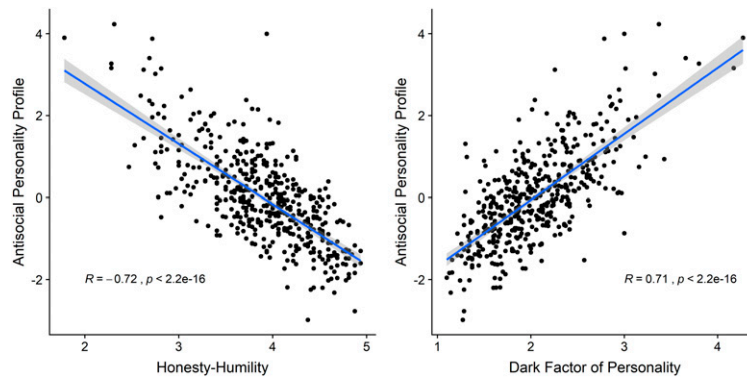


Fig. 1. Relations between the APP and honesty–humility (Left) and the dark factor of personality (D, Right).

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